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ABSTRACT

This research project was inspired by an observation that in written descriptions of pupils by student teachers, gender appeared to play a role in the words used to describe successful students. Girls were interpreted as "overconscientious," while boys were regarded as "scientific types." The project centered on Anna, an elementary school girl who had been so described by one student teacher. The central objective was to find out the contents of the attribute "overconscientious" through examination of different voices: that of the student teacher through reports and discussion about Anna and Ismo (a successful male student); and those from a group discussion between Anna and four classmates identified by the teacher as successful but not overconscientious. (All of these students were male.) Analysis of the reports and discussions revealed that students believe an overconscientious person to be one who always gets full marks on tests, who feels an obligation to always get good marks, who does school work all the time--having no time for hobbies or friends, who answers with the words of the textbooks, and who works hard to please other people, such as through completion of voluntary school work. Although Anna admittedly did not meet these criteria (her own stated criteria for overconscientiousness were somewhat different from those of the group's), boys appeared to have an ideologically-based, gendered orientation toward the label: Anna usually gets good marks, therefore she is overconscientious. This orientation was further evidenced by such comments as "All girls are overconscientious." (Contains 15 references.) (EV)

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PROMINENT OR HARD-WORKING? ABOUT SEX-BASED INTERPRETATION FRAMES IN EDUCATION

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Introduction

In many years student teachers have had a task to become acquainted with children in one class during their first school practice period. After the period the students have written a report of one of the children. There have been some common problems in the reports. One of them has been that the pupil descriptions - or stories, as I have begun to call them - have been only loosely situated. This means that the stories have included very little description of the children's real school life. The second problem has been connected with the first. Instead of interpretations made by the student teachers personally about the children, the stories have included interpretations made with the voices of the class teachers. The third group of problems has been connected with gender. (See Sunnari 1992; 1995.)

One special feature, which I have interpreted to have been connected with gender in the stories, has been that the girls who have been interpreted as being successful in school have at the same time been interpreted to be "terribly conscientious", "overconscientious" or something like that, whereas corresponding boys have been interpreted to be scientific types. I suggested that the term "overconscientious" may refer to the phenomenon of trying too hard, but, in addition to that, it seems to refer to an ideological type, a diminishing and gendered interpretation of someone and her or his activities. This article is a report on an effort to verify the claim. The central person in the effort is Anna. Anna was described to be successful and overconscientious in school in a report made by a student teacher.

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heoretical starting points

theoretical starting-points in understanding humans and their growth are sed on activity-theoretical conceptio s (see Engeström 1987) rooted in gotsky (1978), Leontjev (1978, 1981), Ilyenkov (1977) and their followers. cording to them, it is not the biology that determines the human growth d personalities, nor the social and external world as such. These are both esent in the human growth processes, but a further link is needed which ites these two. The link is activity, the human's active relations towards e ideal and material world and towards her- or himself as part of that world. The ideological formations, which are understood as belief systems and parts of the ideal form of the world, appear to constitute the central basis which people value and locate the material world and its events and ocesses. Belief systems connected with gender are one part of these eological and ideal formations. (Connell 1987; Acker 1991; Lorber & Farrell 91; Lorber 1991; West & Zimmerman 1991.) Corresponding to the general ea, the main form of reproducing gender lies in the interactional-social tivities, in people's actions in their interactional activity contexts. This ocess appears to begin when a baby's parents and the other people acting th the baby know her or his sex and continues throughout the person's e. (See Bem 1983; Ortner & Whitehead 1981; West & Zimmerman 1991; abrucher 1991.)

The shaping of gender contains different processes. (See e.g. Connell 87; Acker 1991.) One of them is the creation of differences and hierarchies tween the sexes, which are essentially not biology-based. Another gender- g process is the construction of symbols and images that explain the erarchies.

udy setting

y practical aim was to try to find out the contents to the attribute "overcon- ientious" and to analyse it from the perspective of gender. I accomplished is by listening to and analysing different voices (see Wertsch 1991) plying to one pupil, Anna, and her success in school. The idea of voice eans that I do not assume that the interpretations which the pupils give are uthful of what the interpreter her- or himself actually thinks about the atter. This presupposition makes it possible to see texts as constellations oted in different quarters and to try to identify some socially shared eological formations in them.

The first set of voices consists of the student teacher's reports on Anna d Ismo, a successful boy, and a discussion with the students after they had nded in their reports. I compare the interpretations of Anna and Ismo. The cond set of voices was construed in a group discussion with Anna and four

of her classmates. The classmates were pupils whom Anna's class teacher identified of being successful in school and whom she interpreted as not being overconscientious.

The central objective was, as it has been mentioned earlier, to try to find out the contents of the attribute "overconscientious". The following subtasks were undertaken while analysing the data:

1. What kind of a picture is to be obtained about the overconscientiousness of Anna, a successful girl in school, and about the scientific quality of Ismo, a successful boy in school, by analysing the student teachers' descriptions of Anna and Ismo?
2. How do Anna and her classmates describe the phenomenon of overconscientiousness?
3. Whom do Anna and her classmates interpret to be overconscientious in their class?
4. How do Anna and her classmates interpret Anna from the perspective of overconscientiousness?
5. How do Anna and her classmates interpret at a more general level the boys and the girls in their class from the perspective of overconscientiousness?

Stories of Anna and Ismo - two successful children in school

A story of Anna and Ismo

At the time of the reports, Anna was on the fifth and Ismo on the first form. Both of the student teachers who made the reports were female.

The student teacher began her **story of Anna** in the following way:

> "I chose Anna as the pupil whom I wanted to become acquainted with, because I found so many features in Anna which were similar to myself when I was in school. Anna is (a pause, VS) a terribly conscientious girl and a girl who has various hobbies."

The student then went on to describe in more detail her own school years, her hobbies at that time, her success in school and her difficulties in the social relations with her classmates. After that she continued the report.

> "Anna was a kind of person who dares to be herself. She had a very special way of dressing and she seemed to be very thoughtful, a really thinking person. I started to have discussions with Anna and I noticed that Anna knew very many things.

When we had a pupil introduction with the teachers in charge, I think they said very much to the point that Anna is an overconscientious girl interested in various things.

(...) From many points of view she seems to be terribly gifted. She is good in gymnastics and in playing the piano and really good at crafts. (...) When we were dealing with human in biology, for instance, Anna had gone to the library (...) and she had found a very good book about the human being for young school children. And every day when we had lessons on human beings (...) Anna would come to the front of the class voluntarily and say that she would read out some facts about humans (...) She really wanted to know things.(...) I think the other pupils also understood what it is to get additional details like this.(...)"

The **story of Ismo** contained the following comments:

"(...) Ismo was a scientific type. He was interested in all kinds of strange things andeverything new that was discussed in the class. (...)

We once had a story time. The children would suggest which book we should read. Ismo produced a children's encyclopaedia, one in which there was information about the ancient Egyptians. It was quite a difficult text. He said that he wanted the teacher to read it to him. It was his own book. (...)

Ismo was a kind of person who reflected (...) and (...) discovereddifferent things. (...) He said for example, that the break supervisor should stay in awatch tower to see all the children and (...) that there should be traffic signs on the school corridors to prevent the children from running there. (...)

It was nice to see that Ismo sometimes got quite carried away during the music lessons. When they were singing a song, he decided with another boy that they should sing in earnest. And so they sang in a very loud voice because they liked it.(...)

They would be so enthusiastic now and then.(...)"

Student teachers' interpretations of scientist features and overconscientiousness from the perspective of gender

You can find many similarities in the reports on Anna and Ismo. Anna and Ismo were both interpreted to be successful in school. Both of them were also said to be interested in various things. Both of them had brought a book to school; a book which the students rated to be scientific. Both of them wanted to share their knowledge of the books with their classmates or at least with the teacher. And both of them were described as being able to surpass currently valued norms.

But there are important differences, too. Although both pupils were said to be interested in various things, Ismo was said to be especially interested in various new things. And because interest in new things is related to cleverness, it is possible to claim that Ismo seemed to be more clever. But we should look into the texts in more detail. Ismo's "new ideas" referred to his proposals of having traffic rules in the corridor and a watch tower for

successful break time supervision. Anna's intellectual relation towards the world was described as follows:

- she was interested in "various things"
- she was "terribly gifted" in various skill areas
- she knew very much about various matters and was eager to discuss them with the student teacher
- every day while they were discussing human biology Anna would, voluntarily, read interesting facts from a book she had brought with her. And according to the report, Anna's "facts" introduced new and interesting knowledge to the class.

Courage and independence, which are also related to cleverness, were differently present in the stories of Ismo and Anna. Ismo was said to be able to surpass the norms of school behaviour, whereas Anna was said to surpass the actual dressing norms. Finally, it can be assumed that Ismo was more clever, because he had a scientific book at home, but Anna only borrowed one.

However, it is obviously impossible to make any valid interpretations on the basis of the two stories as to whether one of these two children was more clever than the other. It is only possible to claim that there were differences in the things which attracted the student teachers' attention and aroused their emotions towards these children, that the student teachers used different terms to illustrate their "findings", and that these differences were typically gendered.

I asked the student to explain why she interpreted Anna to be overconscientious. The argument she gave was connected with the biology project, which was mentioned in the story of Anna. The logic of the argumentation seemed to be that Anna was overconscientious because she worked very hard on her homework. One indication about it was the case. To be conscientious in her homework on human biology, Anna went to the library, borrowed a book, read from it to the other pupils, etc. I asked the student teacher whether such actions were exceptional or usual for Anna. The student teacher said they were usual.

But the biology case was not the only reason why the student teacher interpreted Anna to be overconscientious. According to the story, the class teacher had said Anna was overconscientious. There is reason to believe the text. The student teachers kept diaries during their first school practice. The words reporting Anna's overconscientiousness could be found almost verbatim in a couple of diaries which were written by students who had participated in the information meeting.

nna, the attribute "overconscientious" and Anna's assmates

iscussion context

iscussed overconscientiousness afterwards with Anna and a couple of her assmates. Anna was on the sixth form at that time. To construe the scussion groups, I asked the teacher to name the first four children whom e interpreted to be successful in school and whom she interpreted as ssibly not being overconscientious and then four children whom she erpreted to be successful and to be overconscientious. Anna and another rl, Pauliina, who was also interpreted by a student teacher to be overcon-ientious, were excluded from the selection process, although they partici-ted in the discussions. However, I asked the class teacher whether she erpreted Anna or Pauliina to be overconscientious. She said she did not.

The persons whom the class teacher named to be successful and not to overconscientious were Ana, Juho, Jaska and Jake. These four children are boys. The group of successful and possibly overconscientious pupils cluded Eeva, Jena and Kati. They all are girls. I then asked the teacher to ention one boy, too. I got the name Pertti. The teacher interpreted Pertti as ssibly being or not being overconscientious.

I made up two discussion groups of these pupils. The first of them nsisted of Anna and the four pupils whom the class teacher mentioned to successful and whom she interpreted as not being overconscientious. The cond group consisted of Pauliina and the four pupils whom the class acher interpreted to be both successful and overconscientious.

In this paper, I will only report the discussions of the first group.

eginning of the discussion: Anna, Pauliina, Eeva.... all girls e overconscientious

e first important issue was that the term "overconscientious" was not in tive use among the pupils. I told the pupils that I understood the term as inclination to work harder than is reasonable and maybe trying more than e considers her- or himself to be able to do. This was the starting-point r discussing this phenomenon.

From the very beginning, the discussion on overconscientiousness turned the question of overconscientious pupils. The boys named them. The first pil whom the boys named was Anna and the second Pauliina, the two girls om the student teachers had interpreted to be overconscientious. Then e boys named Jena, Eeva and Kati. They were also the girls whom the class acher had named. In addition to the girls named, some of the boys stated

that all girls are somehow overconscientious. Being a member of the discussion group, Anna tried to refute the claim on her part.

What is the phenomenon of over- conscientiousness like?

The first content the pupils gave to the attribute "overconscientious" was that one gets top marks by working too hard for them. This was the argument they repeated over and over. The following fragment of discussion illustrates this point well.

Jaska: If you see her (Pauliina's, VS) test papers, it is 10, 10, 10, 10-1

Interv: *But does it mean that if you have 10, 10* (I was interrupted, VS)

Jaska: Well no, but look at her answers.

Anna: Her mother and father are teachers.

Jaska: If Pauliina and Eeva have a presentation and I and Jami have one, the presentations differ so that Pauliina's and Eeva's presentation lasts for 15 minutes and ours for 3 - 4 minutes.

Interv: *But is it a sign of overconscientiousness?*

Ana: Well, it is.

Jake: It is sometimes.

Interv: *Why is it particularly a sign of overconscientiousness?*

Jaska: They always get ten as the mark.

Ana: That's right.

Jaska: Well, maybe not the tests as such. You must compare their ways of studying; if they study for three hours for a vocabulary test, I study for 5 - 10 minutes, if at all. It is a necessity for them to get high marks.

(...)

Jaska: We had a terribly difficult test in Finnish and many of us got real low marks. Eeva was the only one who got full points. Everybody else had to repeat. Only Eeva had a possibility to do something else.

Anna: Well, she had everything right.

Jake: I studied a lot, too, and I got quite a good mark, but Eeva must surely have studied for many hours because she got such a very good mark.

On the whole, an overconscientious pupil appears to be a person

- who *always* gets full marks in test. This was the main argument.
- who *considers it to be obligatory* always to get high marks
- who *works hard* particularly *to get full marks* and to *please other people*

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1 This is the highest possible mark in a Finnish numerical school report, where the scale is from four to ten

In addition
- she does school work all the time
- she has no time for hobbies and friends
- she answers with the words of the textbooks
- she gets better test marks than the other
- she accomplishes study products which are superior to the others, particularly with regard to quantity, such as the duration of presentations.

"Overconscientiousness" was also connected with the feature that one always does voluntary school work.

The person who spoke most during the discussion was Jaska. Contrary to him, Anna was interrupted frequently and had difficulties in making herself heard.

Anna's classmates interpreting Anna from the perspective of overconscientiousness

The question of Anna's overconscientiousness was present in the discussion from the very beginning. Anna herself consistently denied the justification of such an interpretation. However, there was no open discussion on the theme.

Interv: *(...) do you have cases where somebody is very conscientious, overconscientious?*
Jaska: Well, like **Anna**
Interviewer: Anna, a*re you overconscientious?*
Anna: No, (a pause, VS) I hate this theme
(...)
A little later I returned to the topic by asking the boys about the matter.
Interv: *Boys, you said Anna is overconscientious?*
Jaska: Well, maybe not.
Interv: *But you said so.*
Jaska: Well, she may be sometimes, but (He did not continue, VS.)
Ana: Well, it is so.

I returned to the question of Anna's overconscientiousness once more in a situation where the pupils had said that one of Eeva's test answers had been directly from a textbook.

Interv: *Well, do you think that Anna also has some inclination to answer directly according to text- books?*
More than one of the boys: Not always.
Jaska: But I have sometimes got better marks than her (Anna, VS)
Anna: Yes, that has happened sometimes.
Jaska: But she (Anna, VS) may have had a much better school report than I.

Anna, are you overconscientious?

As it could be seen earlier, the first pupil whom the boys named to be overconscientious was Anna. Anna's first and immediate reaction to the claim was to deny it. The reaction was strong: she simultaneously said she hates the theme. During the discussion I asked Anna to compare her style of studying with the style the group said Eeva had. "I never study so much for any test", Anna replied.

A little later I introduced the topic of the biology project and Anna's additional study material. I said that I had heard Anna had worked very hard during that project. At first Anna did not remember the project at all. The pupils discussed the additional materials they sometimes bring to school and the additional knowledge which they may have and which they may be eager share. The pupils' opinion was that if you have some knowledge, you will share it and it is normal.

I then asked Anna if it was usual for her to bring additional study materials to school. She answered that it depends on whether she is interested in the theme they are studying and whether she has some additional material for it. After that discussion she remembered something about the case in biology.

Anna: "When we were learning about the human (a pause, VS). We had a book about the human being. There are all kinds of things in it. It must have been that book that I read."

According to the student teacher's story, the book was borrowed, while Anna did not say anything about that.

Are all girls overconscientious?

Interv: *Somebody said that all girls are overconscientious*
Two of the boys: Yes (was interrupted, VS)
Jake: It depends on the group
Interv: *Anna, is it so?*
Anna: No it is not. Not all girls are over (was interrupted, VS)
Ana: Most of them are (was interrupted, VS)
Jake: Well, we boys also want to get good marks, but we would not like to read so much.
Jaska: There is something more interesting to do.

The trend of opinions turned during the discussion. The boys' first comment was: yes, all girls are overconscientious. But there was Jake, a boy, and Anna, a girl, who did not agree with the claim. They both tried to make themselves heard. Anna was interrupted. Jake got himself heard and it was he that turned the direction of the discussion. Jake connected overconscientiousness with good marks and maintained that boys would also like to get good marks.

Anna, are there overconscientious boys in your class?

The last theme I introduced was connected with boys and overconscientiousness. I addressed the question to Anna. But Anna's difficulty to make herself heard was continuous. Jaska was the first to express his opinion. It is difficult to estimate what was the significance of the beginning of the discussion on this theme for Anna's answer. However, Anna was consistently more analytical in her comments than the boys. Another interesting feature can also be seen in this part of the discussion: there are also ruptures and changes in Jaska's rhetoric.

Interv: *One more question. You have discussed girls that you interpret to be overconscientious. Anna, it is your turn to tell me now if there are some boys who can be said to be overconscientious?*

Two or three boys: No, there are not.

Interv: *Boys, it is not your turn to answer. It is Anna's turn.*

Jaska: Well, can we comment then?

Interv: *Yes, of course, just as Anna was also allowed to comment.*

Anna: Well, there may be or may have been some cases in our class, but it is difficult to remember. I think there are some.

Anna named one. It might have been Jake. However, it was not possible to hear it exactly, because Ana spoke loudly at the same time. I did not ask Anna to repeat because of her addition.

Ana: There are not, there are not.

Anna: There are sometimes, (a pause, VS) in tests (pause, VS), usually there are not. But it is so that girls are usually a little more conscientious than boys.

Jaska: It is usually so that the marks in school and being in school are much more important for girls than for boys. It has no meaning to me (a pause, VS), or it has some meaning (a pause, VS), but school does not mean so terribly much to me (a pause, VS) or, well, school does mean, but one test does not.

Anna: Some boys behave in tests so that they only try to do them quickly and then go away.

Interv: *Boys, do you want to comment?*

Jaska: No.

Ana: There are no overconscientious boys.

Jaska: Some of them get good marks in tests, but nobody does all the time.

(...)

Interv: *Which of the boys get good marks?*

Jaska: Well, Eero, Jake. Jake understands. He gets such marks as 8 - 9,5.

Ana: Well, Jaska, too, gets good marks sometimes.

Jaska: Well, in math.

Interv: *You don't consider Jake to be overconscientious, do you?*

Boys: Well, no.

Interv: *What do you consider him to be like?*

Jaska: He swims, too. It takes many hours a day.

Interv: *Well, how do you call him instead of calling him overconscientious, because he gets good marks?*

Jaska: He is good. He understands. He tries to remember everything that is said.

According to the boys, all or most of the girls were overconscientious. The girls named as overconscientious were all successful in school. The boys named successful boys, too. They were not interpreted as being overconscientious by the boys. A successful boy is good. The differences between successful boys and girls were clearly visible in the boys' discussion. The boys have time for hobbies, they do not read too much, they do not always get top marks, and if they are successful, they understand the matters, whereas the successful girls work too much for their marks, and have no time for hobbies. Moreover, according to the boys, the successful boys' ways of studying were more valuable than those of the successful girls. However, although these differences of opinion did dominate, it is not possible to say that all the boys share them as such. Jake seemed to be more analytical in his interpretations, and Jaska, the dominating person, changed his style towards the end of the discussion.

Overconscientiousness as a gendered interpretation shared by student teachers and pupils

On the basis of the stories and interviews, it is difficult for me to interpret Anna as overconscientious, but it is also not possible to claim that she is not. This kind of "truth seeking" has not even been my aim.

The purpose of the study was to find out the contents of the interpretation of overconscientiousness and to analyse it especially from the perspective of gender. According to the pupils, an overconscientious person is one who always gets the mark 10 or full points in tests, who feels it obligatory always to get good marks, who does school work all the time, having no time for hobbies and friends, who answers with the words of the textbooks, who works hard to get top marks and to please other people and who (always) does voluntary school work

Anna was said not to get always "full points", to have lots of friends in and outside school, to have time for her friends and to have many hobbies. However, she was said to be overconscientious. This interpretation was shared by the student teacher, and to some extent by her classmates. And there is reason to claim that the class teacher had also somehow shared the opinion.

In the interview and discussion groups, most of the boys had an ideological-type gendered orientation towards the question of overconscientious-

ss. This orientation was somehow "ready": Anna and Pauliina get full ints and good marks. That is why they must be overconscientious. I claim at such "ready" interpretations are typically ideology-based. The boys' ientation did change to be slightly more analytical during the discussion. owever, the opening of a new perspective seemed to presuppose courage surpass the actual "atmosphere" of the discussion and a status to make neself heard.

Anna's interpretations of the boys were more analytical and more dimenonal than those of the participants who dominated the discussion. Anna's ay of making distinctions between her study style and the study styles of e pupils whom she interpreted as being overconscientious was interesting, o. According to Anna, the picture of an overconscientious pupil is the llowing:

An overconscientious pupil

- spends very much time to study even for simple tests, such as a vocabulary test
- answers in the tests from memory
- works to please the teacher

For Anna herself, gendering in the context of success seemed to imply iminishing interpretations of her performance and her success. In the ontext of the group discussion, gendering seemed to assign to Anna also a wer status than the loud-voiced boys had.

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